

★ The Gilded Age: Birth of an Industrial Commonwealth ★

Mark Twain's 1873 novel *The Gilded Age* gave that title to the entire era of the late 1800s. Historians usually use the title to sum up the greed, materialism, and corruption of public life in those years. The "Gilded Age" is not meant to be a flattering label.

There is of course much to criticize about American life in the late 1800s. The Gilded Age's failures have often been told: Reconstruction's collapse in 1876 and the ending of efforts to protect the rights of the former slaves; the huge gap between the very rich and the very poor; the suffering of immigrants in the slums and the hatred directed at them; the final Indian Wars and the waste of the West's fragile natural resources; the desperate struggles of labor in the face of hostility and violence.

Yet it is easy to overdo this negative interpretation. After all, humans are not perfect, and no age in history is either. That includes our own. So to say that a time in the past was positive and hopeful is not to say it was without flaws. Keeping these flaws in mind then, the Gilded Age was a very positive and hopeful time. It was a time for which Americans should be very thankful.

Take the issue of Reconstruction. It is true that the North gave up on enforcing full equality for the former slaves. After 1876, white Southerners were able to take back control over their state governments. In time, "Jim Crow" segregation laws kept blacks

separate and unequal in many key ways. Clever legal tricks were used to prevent most of them from voting. The Ku Klux Klan and other violent organizations made sure they were too frightened to try to fight back.

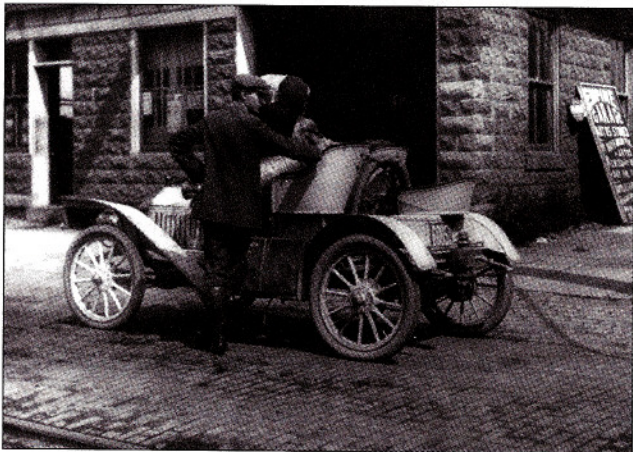


A painting showing an African American voting in 1866. *To the Polls* by T.W. Wood. By permission of T. W. Wood Gallery, Vermont College, Montpelier

Yet at the same time, Reconstruction laid the foundation for all the civil rights struggles to come. The 13th Amendment ended slavery itself in 1865. The 14th Amendment (1868) said that no state could deny any person "life, liberty or property, without due process of law" or "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws." The 15th Amendment (1870) guaranteed blacks the right to vote. Republicans won control of Southern state governments largely with the votes of African Americans, and blacks served honorably in state legislatures and in Congress. Many idealistic Northerners went South to work for the Freedmen's Bureau, setting up schools for the former slaves and helping them in other ways.

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Lacking property and schooling, many former slaves accepted tenant and sharecropping arrangements that kept them in debt and poor. Yet these arrangements also did give them some freedom to make contracts, to move and work for other land owners, to form stable families, etc. Reconstruction was a failure in the short run. The civil rights laws and amendments went unenforced for a long time, it is true. Yet blacks did begin in these years to build up the institutional supports (churches, black colleges, businesses, political organizations) to fight effectively for full equality. It was tragic that this took so long to do. Yet through this long struggle, African Americans really did create a solid basis for their equal place in American society. It was in these years that they laid the foundation for that great triumph to come.



A 1909 photo showing a man putting gasoline in his Buick roadster.
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-69195

The late 1800s, meanwhile, were a time when America took its place as the world's number-one industrial power. Great inventors like Thomas Edison (the phonograph, incandescent lighting, and electric generating systems), Nikola Tesla (AC motors), George

Westinghouse (railroad air brake, AC power generation), Alexander Graham Bell (telephone), Joseph Glidden (barbed wire) or Elisha Otis (elevator) were usually able to find huge corporations and financiers to back their ideas and develop them into amazing new products for consumers.

Among the industrial leaders of the age were John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil, Andrew Carnegie and the steel industry, the Chicago meat-packers such as Philip Armour and Gustavus Swift, investment bankers such as J. P. Morgan and, above all, the great railroad tycoons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Cooke, or James J. Hill.

In the midst of the economic depression of the mid-1890s, the *North American Review* harshly attacked such tycoons as arrogant monopolists, claiming that "their octopus grip is extending over every branch of industry; a plutocracy which controls the price of bread we eat, the price of sugar ... the price of the oil that lights our way, the price of the very coffins in which we are finally buried."

Fears about monopoly definitely did grip the public in these decades. Yet the basic power of a monopoly, as the *North American Review* quote suggests, is an ability to limit supply and drive up prices. Yet prices in general actually fell throughout the late 1800s. Moreover, the prices charged by some of the largest and most powerful corporations fell the fastest. That's because these big businesses all applied the latest technology to mass produce efficiently at lower and lower prices. Most of the time, their aim was not to produce luxury goods

for the wealthy. As Rockefeller himself put it, "We are refining oil for the poor man and he must have it cheap and good." In time, Henry Ford would use assembly-line production to produce a motor car that ordinary Americans could afford. And when he did, it would be fueled by gasoline refined by Standard Oil.

Meanwhile, the biggest corporations of the day, the railroads, were busy helping to develop the entire land mass of the continental United States. Government grants of millions of acres of public land helped finance the great rail lines. The railroads wanted to sell the land and settle farmers on it rapidly. Not only did the railroads earn money from these land sales, but they also gained customers who would ship produce on their roads and make them profitable. The Homestead Act of 1862 also encouraged millions to strike out on their own and establish farms out west.

Railroad corruption, graft, and stock swindles abound in the history of this epic railroad-building era. However, these often had more to do with government aid to the railroads than with any defect in the private corporate business system. For example, some railroads got thousands of dollars in government loans or subsidies for each mile of track laid. This often tempted them to build far more track than necessary. Given such high stakes, bribing lawmakers was all too common. Yet James J. Hill built his transcontinental line, the Great Northern, with no public funds or land grants at all, and it was one of the most successful and honestly run of all the transcontinental railroads.

Farmers were one group especially upset with the railroads — and with the banks, farm equipment sellers, grain elevator operators, and other middle men. Low farm prices and high farmer debt led to constant agrarian protests. Yet the Western lands kept filling up with farmers and ranchers. Farmers demanded silver coinage as a way to trigger inflation. Their hope was that this would make it easier for them to pay their debts and meet other costs. Yet farmers had these debts because they were already small business owners not a downtrodden peasantry. The problem was simply that there were too many of them, and they had become too good at increasing production. The price of a good falls when there is an oversupply of it. Millions of new American farmers were now competing with farmers all over the world. The very success of the industrial age in creating a huge world market was what hurt the farmer — not some imaginary conspiracy of monopolists and international bankers.

Farm life was hard, and many farmers were very poor, it is true. In the cities and factories, workers also endured terrible conditions, long hours, and low wages. Labor violence in the late 1800s was real, frequent, and often tragic. Yet the average worker's income did go up, slowly but steadily, over this time period. Hours of work were slowly coming down. Life was getting better for most workers. The labor movement that did emerge mainly accepted capitalism, it did not seek to overthrow it. This was especially true of the key labor organization, the American Federation of Labor.

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It is true that small groups of anarchists, socialists, and other radicals did advocate violent revolution. The anarchists accused of the bombing in Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886 were probably all innocent. Yet they did glorify violence, and in doing so they angered not only wealthy business owners, but most workers as well. Even in a severe depression in 1896, millions of industrial workers backed William McKinley over reformer William Jennings Bryan.



An 1880 cartoon showing Uncle Sam welcoming immigrants. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-954

America's prosperity also attracted millions of immigrants. As with native-born farmers and workers, immigrants also faced huge obstacles. Anti-immigrant sentiment was a cruel burden at times—for Asians especially. Yet the immigrants kept coming. Despite "know-nothing" fears, newcomers were for the most part accepted and even welcomed in. Millions of them would have agreed with Mary Antin's description of America as "the promised land." Her story is especially telling. Her family fled anti-Semitic violence in Russia far more fearful than the prejudices

encountered here. Meanwhile, even this once middle class family was amazed at times by the material wonders of their new homeland.

At the very end of the 1800s, America suddenly took its place on the world stage during the Spanish-American war. This was an imperial adventure to some degree. Yet it did not result in much of a colonial empire. Moreover, it launched the U.S. on a course of world leadership that in the end would make the nation the key defender of democracy against totalitarian dictatorship throughout the entire twentieth century.

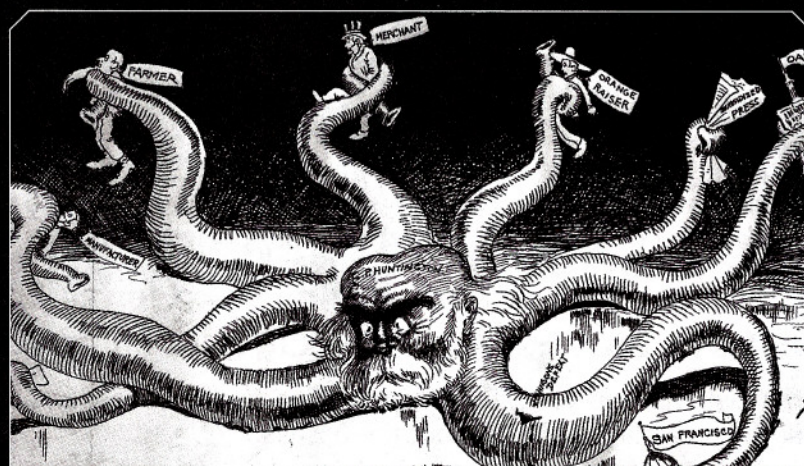
In all sorts of ways, local and less formal social patterns were giving way to a more organized way of life in America. National labor unions arose, as did women's organizations, along with businesses and other institutions with a nationwide reach. The beginnings of professional police and fire departments, sewage systems, and public health programs began to improve the teeming cities. Urban misery continued to exist, but economic, social and cultural progress is easy to see—in skyscrapers, opera houses, lighting systems, streetcars, amusement parks, offices, museums, and hospitals. A new urban and industrial commonwealth began to take shape in these years. By 1900, the promise of American life was huge—far greater than it had been in 1865. A new industrial age had come into being, and for most Americans this was very good news indeed.

Debating the DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

The Gilded Age

*Age of the Robber Baron or
Birth of an Industrial Commonwealth?*



This guide contains two short essays offering very different views on the "Gilded Age." On pages 2-3 you will find instructions for taking notes on these essays and planning to debate them as a class. Your first task is to decide which essay you agree with and why. Your second task is to understand and be ready to defend the other essay as well. This will help you get ready to debate the essays in class. This guide will also offer some guidelines for the classroom debate.

Suggestions for the Student

★ Your Overall Objective

The essays in this guide present two conflicting views of the late 1800s in America, a time often called the "Gilded Age." Your task is to read the essays, take notes on them, and prepare to debate them in class. All this will help you see something important about studying history. History as a field is an ongoing discussion, or dialogue. Facts and the truth are important. Many matters can be settled. Yet one of the most exciting parts of history is found in the debates that keep it going. These debates are what guide historians in trying to answer the most important questions about the past.

1. Review any *Debating the Documents* notes you have.

The two essays in this guide will each mention some of the primary sources in the nine *Debating the Documents* sets on the Gilded Age. To judge each essay, it will help to refresh your memory about the topics and sources used in those sets.

2. Read both essays in this guide.

Each essay argues in favor of one view of the Gilded Age. The two essays are very clearly opposed to each other. Each one states its view right away in its first paragraphs. It then supports this view by referring to specific aspects of American life during the late 1800s. The essays are strongly biased, but they back up their claims with facts and sources. You do NOT have to agree with either essay. Your own opinion may differ from both of them. Your goal should be to read the essays carefully and use them to clarify your own ideas about this period of history.



3. Take notes on each essay using the Checklist on page 3 of this guide.

This checklist will help you think through all parts of each essay, and it will help you prepare for your role in a class debate about the essays.

4. Follow your teacher's instructions for holding a class debate on these essays.

You will have a set task or role to play. It will be to defend one of the essays, ask questions of the defenders, or try to settle differences between the two groups of defenders. You will get a chance to state your own views. However, the debate will work best if you also play the role you are assigned.

5. Follow these additional rules for taking part in the debate:

- Use your notes and other worksheets to help you take part in the debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the overall meaning of each essay.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the two essays.
- Listen closely in the debate to all points of view about each essay.
- Focus on the strengths of each essay, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with it.

Essay Analysis Checklist

Use this checklist to take notes on the two essays in this guide.

As you read each essay, take a few notes on the topics listed below. Use these when preparing for your role in the debate on these two opposing views about the Gilded Age. (Use other sheets of paper as needed.)

- **State the essay's thesis. That is, state its main idea as presented in the first few paragraphs.**
- **What key statements of fact best help back up the essay's thesis or main idea?**
- **Do any statements of fact seem false or unlikely to be accurate? List them.**
- **Which statements are most biased? That is, which are one-sided opinions not based on facts or clear reasons? List some.**
- **How well are the primary sources used? Which sources are used to most clearly back up the thesis?**
- **Is the logic of the argument clear? Why or why not?**
- **Overall, how strong a case does this essay make? Why?**